

Exploring the impact, value and limitations of reflective practice groups for clergy in a Church in Wales diocese

Abstract

This research explores the impact, value and limitations of reflective practice groups for Clergy in a Church in Wales diocese. The aims were to explore what participants of reflective practice groups experience as the impact, value and limitations of their groups, and to better understand any implications for delivery of reflective practice groups for Clergy. Two focus groups comprising of the participants from two reflective practice groups from a diocese in the Church in Wales were interviewed, and the data analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Two superordinate themes emerged along with ten subordinate themes. The key findings are that the participants of both groups clearly found them to be a valuable experience and self-defined the impact on their ministries as: creating more reflective clergy; developing greater wisdom; building and gaining affirmed strategies that they could take back into relationships within their parishes; enabling a different perspective to be gained on management expectations; development of self-preservation strategies for coping with those expectations; improvement in practice and relationships within their work; improving their priestly skills; managing boundaries more appropriately; approaching meetings more positively; managing situations in more helpful ways; and discerning what God may be saying in certain situations.

Keywords: Reflective practice groups; Clergy; Impact; Benefits; limitations

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Introduction

Reflective practice groups are increasingly being utilised and promoted within the Church of England (Gubi, 2016), and in the Church in Wales, as a means of supporting clergy wellbeing. The poor psychological health and isolation of some clergy is well-documented (Stuart-White et al., 2018). It is often brought about by poor boundaries, inadequate self-care, emotional isolation, a lack of privacy for clergy families, and many pulls on clergies' time (e.g., Charlton et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2005; Francis et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2000; Gubi & Korris, 2015; Hudson, 2015; Jackson-Jordan, 2013; Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2013; Proeschold-Bell et al., 2011). In response to these concerns, and through a desire to offer emotional support as a duty of care, several dioceses within the Church of England and the Church in Wales, have worked with St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy to facilitate reflective practice groups for clergy. Each group strives to provide a safe space for clergy to express and explore issues that arise from their work and is usually facilitated by an external person who is counsellor/ psychotherapist trained and experienced in group processes (Gubi & Korris, 2015). They are non-directive, closed groups that aim to offer opportunities for reflection on interactions and processes at a psychological, relational and spiritual level (Gubi, 2011), they create communities of practice for intentional reflection on participants' ministries (Braudaway-Bauman, 2012) and act as a form of group pastoral supervision. These groups create opportunity for openness and honesty before others, and members are required to work towards finding a way to both hold vulnerability and affirm the confidence and authority of the other. They provide a chance for participants to tell their story, to give and receive support and encouragement in the situation in which each incumbent finds him/ herself, which can be taken back into the life and ministry of each member. However, they do not suit everyone (Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2013). Recent

small-scale research (e.g., Barrett, 2010; Gubi, 2016; Gubi & Korris, 2015; Travis, 2008) has established the effectiveness of reflective practice groups in supporting clergy in the Church of England. Gubi's (2016) research highlights their value as: offering support, enabling clergy to feel less isolated, enabling clergy to gain an insight into the way that they think and into the impact of their way of being on others, enabling clergy to respect difference better and to gain a better sense of selfcare, enabling clergy to engage in a better quality of pastoral encounter with others and to interact better with others in their ministry, enabling clergy to grow as human beings, enabling trust and vulnerability to be experienced safely, and enabling clergy to negotiate boundaries better. However, Miles and Proeschold-Bell (2013) state that such groups are not beneficial for everyone, and evidence from the use of reflective practice groups (e.g., Gubi, 2017; Gubi and Korris, 2015) suggests that such groups have their limitations.

Method

The research question for this study was: What have participants of reflective practice groups for Clergy in a Church in Wales diocese experienced as the impact, value and limitations of reflective practice groups? The aims were: to explore what participants of reflective practice groups experience as the impact, value and limitations of their groups; and to better understand any implications for delivery of reflective practice groups for Clergy. St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy had initiated the facilitation of five reflective practice groups for two years in the Diocese of Monmouth. This research was undertaken at the end of the two years. With permission of the Diocese of Monmouth and St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy, all five reflective practice groups were approached to take part in this research. Only two groups responded to the request and were interviewed as two

focus groups with the permission of the external facilitators and the clergy participants.

Group 1 (G1) comprised of two members, having originally started with four people. None were from the same deanery. Group 2 (G2) comprised of four members, having originally begun with six. The other three groups had ceased to be operational for various unknown reasons at the time of the research. The interviews were digitally (audio) recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus group semi-structured interviews comprised the following questions:

- What were your expectations and hopes of your reflective practice group before you participated in it?
- Did the reflective practice group meet your expectations and hopes?
- In what ways do you feel you developed in the group?
- What changes to your practice/ministry have come about as a result of the group?
- What did you particularly value about the group?
- What hindered your progress in the group?
- How effective do you feel the facilitation of the group was?
- How do you feel the group might have been facilitated differently?
- Is there anything else you may want to add?

These questions were asked as they were thought pertinent to drawing out phenomenological data which would answer the research question. The external facilitators were not present for the focus groups. The data analysis was conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analytic (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 1999; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to enable the issues to be heard in the voices of the participants (i.e. thick data), to ascertain a fuller sense of their lived-experience. IPA enables the

clustering of the lived-experience to emerge into themes from the data. Data are organised into superordinate and subordinate themes which reflect both the shared experience and the individual experience of the participants. A theme is therefore a lived-experience perspective. Saturation is not sought, and the data therefore has limited generalisability, but is nonetheless of value in gaining an insider perspective of the experience being researched, which adds to a greater understanding of the phenomena being investigated. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Chester.

Findings

The data were analysed into superordinate and subordinate themes (see Table 1).

Superordinate Theme 1: Benefits	Superordinate Theme 2: Limitations
Subordinate theme 1.1: Expectation	Subordinate theme 2.1: Suspicion
Subordinate theme 1.2: Impact on ministry	Subordinate theme 2.2: No choice
Subordinate theme 1.3: Value	Subordinate theme 2.3: Trust
Subordinate theme 1.4: Facilitator's qualities	Subordinate theme 2.4: One-upmanship
	Subordinate theme 2.5: Diocesan dynamics
	Subordinate theme 2.6: Uncertainty of the group

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate theme 1: Benefits

Subordinate theme: 1.1: Expectation

None of the participants knew what to expect, although one participant from G2 had encountered reflective practice groups in his ordination training. However, all participants in both groups, felt that the reflective practice groups had exceeded their expectations:

“... it’s exceeded my expectations from the point of view of the support that we’ve had. I would probably be in a different place if I hadn’t have been here” (G1).

Subordinate theme: 1.2: Impact on ministry

The impact of the groups on the participants’ ministries was more difficult to quantify, but seemed to create more reflective practitioners who used the space to develop their wisdom in various situations, receive challenge and develop affirmation of their strategies, which they were then able to take back into their parish work:

“being able to take that space back and then reflect something back into a situation. It gave you that little bit of extra room to move things on. So, in terms of parish and diocese and relationships, that’s been helpful” (G1).

“The group has contributed to affirming in me my right to work out my own strategy for moving forward and giving me a space where I was encouraged to be more self-confident than I would be without it. So, in a sense, I felt that the experience of the group has reinforced my own strength as a person in a significant way, and helped me to see positives and strengths in myself, and value myself as a priest, which the experience of the diocese, I find, takes away. So, there’s positive reinforcement” (G1).

One participant from G1, valued the ability to ‘step-back’ from some of the management expectations of the diocese and develop some self-preservation strategies and ways of thinking:

“You don’t just move on from one heavily emotional interview, straight into another, like you were working on a reception desk with people queuing up to make appointments. So, what being in this group has done is it’s allowed us to step back and to see how much of that is the fact that what the management are wanting to produce in terms of a thing, and where they’re coming from, and then to see how we respond to that, and how we preserve ourselves through our response to that. The self-preservation bit is left very much to us these days, and it’s about how we access that for ourselves’ (G1).

One participant in G1 felt that it wasn’t so much his ministry that had outwardly changed, as that his approach to relationships had improved:

“I think, fundamentally, it hasn’t changed my actual practice. It’s more changed my outlook, which has helped me to improve the practice, make the practice work better. It’s made the relationships work better. I think that’s been a big help” (G1).

For one participant, the group provided a ‘filtering opportunity’ to begin to see dynamics in a different way, improve their priestly skills and manage their boundaries better:

“It’s about being able to step back from your own feelings, to say, ‘This isn’t about the way this situation impacts me. It’s about the way this situation is impacting this other person,’ which is a, sort of, priestly skill, isn’t it, but it’s sharpened that, which is interesting” (G1).

“What was of me and what is of another are less enmeshed now. I think, for me, it helped. I suppose it helped my boundary management really, by which I mean the nurturing of myself, but also my ability to be truly present in the situation with others, without bringing my stuff into it, and if there was something, I’d, sort of, notice it more quickly” (G1).

“So, you go into a meeting... I think possibly there is a tendency, as you plough through things, very often, to go into it hoping for the best and expecting the worst, whereas you’re able to go into a situation, not only hoping, but expecting good things, which does change your relationship with people. You may be knocked back and disappointed, but that’s what happens. If that happens, it happens, but you don’t go in worrying about the fact that that might happen, because you’re able to disassociate yourself, and your own personal stuff from that” (G1).

Some participants found that the discussions, and occasional challenges, in the group helped them to manage situations in a more helpful way:

“You might learn something new, ‘Well actually I didn’t deal with it that way, I dealt with it this way.’ So, it’s been useful from that point of view” (G2).

“We might have said, ‘We wouldn’t quite do it that way but very similar.’ So, we’re always confirming and affirming one another. We come with lots of problems sometimes, but then one or other of us will say, ‘Well there was another way of tackling that. Did you think about this or did you think about that?’ Do you know what I mean?” (G2).

“Because even after all these years you can often find yourself in a situation where you’re thinking, ‘Is that the right thing to have done? Did I really do that right or could I have ...?’ And so finding a little group like this where you’ve been able to say, ‘Well this is what I did,’ and others have said, ‘Well I might have done that,’ you know, ‘I might have done it this way but it would’ve resulted the same,’ that’s very affirming... in a way it’s affirming God’s affirmation, if that doesn’t sound like double Dutch” (G2).

Some participants found the group helpful in discerning what God was saying:

“I would like to think I come into every situation thinking, ‘Well God’s got me here, there’s got to be a reason’. Rather than me looking for the down, let’s look for the up on it. And even if it’s just taking time out ... Because if I wasn’t doing this, I would be doing something else, and is God saying, ‘Well actually ...,’ and if you just back off of that for just a little minute and have a little bit of something different. Whereas I perhaps wouldn’t do that. This meeting up occasionally with other people aids that” (G2).

Subordinate theme: 1.3: Value

The participants of G1 and G2 found their groups to be a place of respect, support, understanding, acceptance and a safe space.

“A place where we could share without judgement, and with simply receiving what was being said, and, at the same time, probing and encouragement. Sometimes to

look at another way of seeing it, but respectfully and considerately... an element of challenge about it, you know, about our perspectives, because quite often, particularly in parish ministry, you can get yourself into a slightly negative mindset, and to find a way of turning that round as a group” (G1).

The group helped some participants to feel less isolated and more able to share the burden with other priests:

“It has really helped me to feel a lot less isolated, and, to be honest with you, the experience has made me feel that I and others have been treated with contempt, and the group has reversed that. It’s at least given me a space where I have not felt treated contemptuously, although I perfectly understand it wasn’t some deliberate policy. It has been the experience, and the group has enabled me to see beyond that, to realise and imagine. At least in this group, that has not been the experience, which has been very, very good, and has enabled me to find a way through it, with integrity and with your true self, which has really, I think, enabled us to survive.

Sometimes XXX would say what I didn’t want to hear, you know, things like, ‘How do you survive?’ which would actually make me realise what hard work it was to survive, because when you’re doing it, in a sense, it’s hard to look at it. This provided a space where you could look at it and go away and think, ‘Actually, I’m doing that better than I thought, and maybe I can do this better.’ It just gave you, sort of, a neutral space” (G1).

“I have a real sense that being a priest in a parish these days feels to me to be more isolated than it did when I started nearly forty years ago. I think the reason for that is

simply that there were three times as many priests around as there are now, so in deanery meetings there were always good numbers. I mean, I can remember deanery weekends with twenty, twenty-five clergy. And you always felt that you were a part of a group of priests and there were always opportunities to chat stuff through, etc. Those opportunities now are much less frequent. So, I just value the chance regularly of meeting with fellow priests and being able to just sort of share the experience of priesthood and what that means and hear other perspectives” (G2).

“It gives a chance to talk to other clergy and understand the problems we all have in our ministry, whereas you can’t really just talk to your parishioners about it. Fine, you can go home to your wife and bat on to your wife about it for hours and hours but it’s great when you’re all together sharing something. I seem to think sometimes it just lessens the burden. It’s always good to unburden something” (G2).

“You’re recognising your experiences are not just your experiences ... Because it isn’t just about priesthood, this is about ministerial leadership, so it’s about leadership roles so I think ... Because you could be a priest in a completely different role and not have the same sort of pressures, so I think it is about leadership. I mean, it’s good to be able to share or offload but also to have stuff confirmed so that, you know, one of us says something and the others will say, ‘Yes, I’ve had a very similar experience and that’s how I dealt with it too’” (G2).

“I do recognise the advantage of being able to share priestly stuff with other priests... we have deanery meetings or PCC meetings. We can’t offload to people there, because they look to the priest for leadership so you need to be in this environment, which is a safe environment because obviously it’s confidential as well, and we can share our problems and pray about our problems as well, which is really important.” (G2).

“I think we particularly value we have busy lives and we have this chance to sit down for an hour or two or three and discuss things that are important to us as priests. Also, I think when we leave this place we don’t forget what we’ve discussed but I feel a bit of a warmth when I drive down that drive, thinking, ‘Thank you very much for that, because that was important’” (G2).

One participant felt that they had become more creative:

“I’ve become more creative over the last year, but whether that’s simply the result of the group, I don’t know. I’ve gone back to writing poetry, and I think I’ve found more of a sense of being anchored where I am, even though I know that one day, someone might chop the anchor adrift” (G1).

Others felt that the group had helped them to grow psychologically:

“I don’t quite know how to enunciate what it is, but it’s enabled me to move along significantly in my own psychology and my own psychological process. I had a very significant dream at one point, which I shared with the group, and the group’s

reception and comment on the dream was extremely helpful to me. As a result of it, I have progressed considerably” (G1).

One participant felt that it was necessary to take part in the group to set an example of good practice for younger priests:

“I think perhaps the benefits of it as well is deep down we’re doing it for other clergy who are coming through now. So, if people find this beneficial, which we certainly do in any case, it will benefit younger clergy coming through who are not part of these reflective groups at the moment and who want to share with their fellow clergymen” (G2).

Subordinate theme: 1.4: Facilitator’s qualities

All of the participants in both groups greatly valued the qualities of their facilitators and recognised how their way of being and skills had benefitted their experience of the group:

“She’s facilitated very well, but because she has also been, at times, appropriately self-revealing, that has, in itself, been very encouraging for us to have someone who shares the fact that she also has faith, and that has been really helpful and when it’s being facilitated by someone who knows what it is, the difficulty of engaging professionally in a situation, when it is also your philosophy in life, and how tricky that can be... I mean, she was willing to have the God conversation, and to mention God. She’s just been brilliant because she worked with our anxieties to begin with, and she took time to get to know us and to know how we were working. She, sort of, introduced helpful techniques, and before she introduced the techniques, she, sort

of, said, you know, 'What would you think about that?' She's always respected us in that way, that she's not trying to impose anything on us at all. She just allows... I don't know how she does it, but she's just a very gifted person. She really has brought out the best in us. She's given us a real sense of owning the group, while knowing that she had made a very safe space where we could trust enough to move forward. I have really valued her humour and just that surety, and yet lightness of touch that I think has been just about right really" (G1).

"I think it's quite unusual, the way he facilitates. It's very gentle, no push to it at all. He sometimes focuses you very sharply onto something but I don't feel that that's forceful, he's just saying, 'Well let me try and work out where you're at, I'm here ...,' and all of a sudden he focuses you right down on something" (G2).

It also felt important, to some, that the facilitator wasn't within the 'dynamic' of the Church:

'I was going to say definitely out of the organisation, somebody from without, that comes completely unbiased... somebody who isn't part of the structure here' (G2).

Superordinate theme 2: Hindrances

Some aspects of the experience hindered the group for some.

Subordinate theme 2.1: Suspicion

Both members of G1 expressed feeling profoundly sceptical and suspicious at the start of the group because they hadn't been given any clear sense of the structure or purpose of the group. There was a sense of this being 'part of some sort of big brother deal from the diocese'. One member of G1 expressed that it:

"took a lot to think through committing myself to the process, although I very much wanted to as I was extremely keen to be in reflective practice" (G1).

Subordinate theme 2.2: No choice

One participant in G1 expressed having been given no choice with the group that they were allocated to. It was allocated centrally.

Subordinate theme 2.3: Trust

Building trust at the start seemed important to all participants in both G1 and G2:

"We began to realise that that fourth person would not fit in with the group, because there's a lot of trust involved in this group. It was about saying... you couldn't guarantee that what you said would remain confidential, whereas with the group we ended up with, we knew we were alright. So, as we began to realise that, then the group began to work" (G1).

"We can trust confidentiality here, can't we? Because we all know each other but if you've got five or six different people who don't really know each other ... there's that trust" (G2).

The third member of G1 couldn't build the trust and left.

Subordinate theme 2.4: One-upmanship

One of the aspects that was identified as being potentially hindering of the process, was if the group became competitive, i.e. about one-upmanship. Neither group felt that that was present among their group. Comparing the experience of their reflective practice group with another group that s/he had been in:

“The feedback that I got from colleagues was that there was a sense of one-upmanship going on in the group. So, it was a question of, ‘Well, I’m doing this in my parish. Aren’t I marvellous?’ and they weren’t engaging with one another. They were being more competitive than complimentary ... a phrase I once heard, I quite like, bitching or boasting, rather than sharing and supporting which is a problem” (G1).

Subordinate theme 2.5: Diocesan dynamics

For G1, the absence of having a diocesan Bishop at the time of the research had clearly impacted on what they brought to the group. They used it as an opportunity to reflect on their frustration as decisions weren't being made at diocesan level, which impacted significantly on them.

“I must admit that what has happened in the diocese has overshadowed it so much, and, in a sense, I don't really feel we've had a year of reflecting on ministry practice” (G1).

However, for the participants in G2, the same difficulties were around, but were less intrusive to their experience of the group.

“In our day-to-day work there is no doubt that the issue of what’s been happening in the diocese and the Bishop and whatever that’s been about and all the rest of that, there is no doubt that for all of us that’s been a pain in the backside and it’s made life very difficult. We’ve expressed those difficulties in this group, but I don’t think it’s been a hindrance in terms of how these groups have worked” (G2).

Subordinate theme 2.6: Uncertainty of the group

One aspect of hindrance that both groups mentioned, was the high drop-out rate, which impacted on the experience of the group.

“The uncertainty about the makeup of the group is difficult, and then the group changing was difficult as well” (G1).

“We started with about six or seven of us and we’ve dwindled down to just the three of us now. And I found that a sadness when people have chosen to opt out. Now, I know why one person has opted out and I understand that and I’m happy with that but there’s one person who’s just not come. Came the first time and not seen them since and I find that odd. So, there’s no explanation and there’s not attendance so I find that more of a problem than competition” (G2).

“I was also a bit disappointed that people dropped out very close to the beginning and at that point I did wonder if we were going to survive. But apart from that I wouldn’t say I’ve felt hindered” (G2).

There was a sense of a missed opportunity for G2 that younger members of the clergy seemed less committed and hadn’t felt that they could have benefitted from the experience and wisdom of the more experienced members of the group:

“In just us three there’s a wealth of experience and, I would like to add, wisdom that I think a younger person could tap into. By opting not to be part of this group then you don’t have the opportunity of tapping into that joint and massive experience” (G2).

Having benefitted from the group, there was a lack of empathy with those who dropped-out:

“I have been surprised that I’ve not resented coming. I’ve not got up and thought, ‘Oh, I could really do without this today.’ I’ve thought, “I’m going up to XXX. XXX’ll be there and it’ll be fine” (G2).

Discussion

This exploration is limited in that it is only from one diocese and consists of only two small reflective practice groups. It does not represent saturation of the phenomena, but IPA does not require this. The voices that are expressed are not from those who have left the groups and they, presumably, didn’t find them as beneficial as those who remained and took part in the research did. Because of these factors, the generalisability of the findings is

limited. However, this does not invalidate the meaningfulness of the experience for those who remained committed to the groups and took part in the research.

The participants of both groups clearly found them to be a valuable experience and self-defined the impact on their ministries as: creating more reflective clergy; developing greater wisdom; building and gaining affirmed strategies that they could take back into relationships within their parishes; enabling a different perspective to be gained on management expectations; development of self-preservation strategies for coping with those expectations; improvement in practice and relationships within their work; improving their priestly skills; managing boundaries more appropriately; approaching meetings more positively (i.e. with less negative expectation of outcome); managing situations in more helpful ways; and discerning what God may be saying in certain situations. None of these self-defined impact benefits are evident in the literature.

The value, or benefits, of the groups mostly concurs with previous research (e.g., Gubi, 2017; Gubi & Korris, 2015). These are: finding them to be a place of value, support, respect, understanding, acceptance and safety. Participants felt less isolated as they shared their burdens with other priests. They gained other perspectives which enabled them to see beyond their immediate difficulties to realise and imagine different possibilities. The groups created a space that enabled participants to offload and to find a way through situations with integrity and authenticity. It isn't often that priests can find opportunity to offload 'priestly stuff' safely because of their role and because of the confidences entrusted to them. The groups enabled some to experience psychological growth, and another to become more creative. There was benefit seen in being able to share wisdom and experience with younger, more inexperienced, clergy.

The data suggest that key to enabling the experience to be beneficial are the qualities and skills of the facilitator, which participants identified as: appropriately self-revealing; sharing faith appropriately; having a willingness to have the 'God conversation'; having an ability to work with participants' anxieties; taking time to get to know participants; having an ability to introduce helpful techniques; being always respectful; not imposing; just allowing; giving a sense of ownership to the group; creating a safe space where trust can grow; having a lightness of touch; having an appropriate sense of humour; possessing a holding presence; having the ability to focus; and having a gentleness of presence. The data suggest that it wasn't important for the facilitator to be a priest, but that it was more important that s/he wasn't part of the diocesan dynamic.

The participants felt that the following might be hindering factors (for some): the uncertain dynamics within the particular diocese (in that they didn't have a Bishop at the time of the groups and decisions weren't being made which caused immense frustration for some); a sense of suspicion (for some) around the motives of the diocese for hosting reflective practice groups (i.e. is this 'big brother' at work?); not being given a choice of which group to belong to; a lack of trust that some seemed unable to gain (and who then left); a sense of competitiveness in the group; and by the uncertainty of the viability of the group when others left.

Conclusion

This small-scale research demonstrates something of the value, impact and limitations of reflective practice groups from the perspectives of the participants within one diocese and two groups. The data suggest that the implications for delivery of reflective practice groups for Clergy might be:

- The necessity of carefully employing good external facilitators who are not part of diocesan dynamics;
- Emphasising the importance of commitment when embarking on participation in reflective practice groups;
- Carefully facilitating a reduction in uncertainty, suspicion and competitiveness if any of these traits are present.

This research demonstrates something of the impact that participating in reflective practice groups can have on ministry and on priests as human beings (albeit it is a self-defined impact rather than a measured impact), and contributes something to the discussion about how dioceses might best fulfil their duty of care to clergy and best support their wellbeing.

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